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ABSTRACT

This bulletin focuses on the views of four authors. The first, Daniel R. Davies, describes the rise and fall of local control and local school board policies and predicts how the vacuum will be filled. Specifically, he analyzes the concomitant waning of local control and school board policymaking power and forecasts stages in the transition from local to national supervision of education. The next three authors, Victor Ross, Linda Leopardi, and Ann P. Kahn, ideologically object to Davies' views on the basis that public monitoring of education will not be as sensitive, flexible, or accountable to local needs as local school boards are now. (JAM)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 19/Number 9/October 1988

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by Daniel R. Davies

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Policies, local control, and other antiquities

by Daniel R. Davies

Local school board policies and local control of education go together like Damon and Pythias. They are mutually supportive. They are now mutually threatened. For more than 30 years now, I have supported local control of education through locally developed school board policies. The peak of local policy development came in the 1960s. Since that time, both local control of education and associated local board policies have been on the decline.

Reviewed in this article are my views as to the rise and fall of local control and local school board policies, and my suggestions for compensating for such losses. Admittedly, my suggestions may be considered novel or controversial, or both. I offer them as a means of assisting the survival of our basic way of life.

Fall of local control

Widescale school consolidations during the middle of the 20th century, brought about in the interest of "economy" and "efficiency" and the need for more money than "small" districts could raise, began the toppling of local control and the decline of the influence of local school boards. Bigness, the root threat to local control plus widespread social and technological changes which followed World War II, spawned others:

- Board members griped about their subservient roles in working with superintendents. Demand for written school board policies and expansion in membership and strength of school boards associations resulted.
- School staffs wanted more say in decisions affecting them. Local teachers associations joined into state and national ones. Changes in state laws allowed employees to enter into "negotiations" with school boards.
- Local citizens won a place in making decisions about schools. They organized nationally (e.g., the National PTA and National Committee for Citizens in Education. Conflicts between citizen groups and local boards occasionally led to litigation, some of which further diminished local control.
- Increased financial support from the federal government (and the inevitable strings attached thereto) chipped away more local control.
- State legislatures and state departments of education grind out more and more laws, regulations, and directives further limiting the discretionary powers of local boards.
- School boards associations are hurrying the destruction of local control by distributing manuals of sample policies which, experience has shown, tend to be adopted *verbatim*.
- Teachers and administrators are coming from the lower social, economic, and educational ranks of our population. Their power and ability to resist the inroads of centralization weakens.

As local control wanes, so also does the policy-making role of school boards. Manuals for the future, it seems, will be procedural manuals passed down from on high.

Dear Readers:

From time to time, *Updating* will provide a forum to discuss an issue of general interest to school board members and administrators. This month, Daniel R. Davies describes a dramatic school board reform proposal which is followed by the responses of three educators, each of whom offers a distinctive reaction to his plan for national control of education.

Under the veil of the future

Prediction #1: *A fundamental reassessment of our nation's goals and policies—including those of education—is being forced upon us.*

According to Henry Kissinger (in a syndicated article published in *The Arizona Daily Star*, April 17, 1988), the U.S. as a matter of survival must make such a fundamental reassessment because of the decline in prestige and influence of our current superpowers, together with the rise to world leadership of Asian countries: Japan, China, and India.

Prediction #2: *Setting goals for education will no longer be left to local whims and prejudices.*

Surveys of opinions of school district residents concerning goals for their schools cannot rise above the level of awareness and aspiration of those responding. Clearly that approach to goal setting will no longer suffice if one accepts the assumption that education and national survival are related.

Prediction #3: *All materials of instruction and curriculum content will have to be in harmony with national goals for education.*

I realize that this has been the bogey-

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In 1955 Dr. Davies, along with Henry M. Brickell, developed the **Davies-Brickell System for School Board Policy Making**. *After receiving a degree from Harvard College in 1933, Davies taught at Columbia University until the 1960s when he and Dr. Brickell incorporated as Davies-Brickell Associates, Ltd. This article was condensed from Davies' keynote address delivered at last spring's American Association of State Policy Services conference in Kansas City, Missouri. The full-length version was published in the September 1988 issue of* **National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal**. Copies may be ordered for *$10; reprints of the speech are $8 each. Write to NFEAS, 1705 Plantation Drive, Alexandria, LA 71301.*

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man of all who feared—and fear—federal control of education. It makes it possible, they say, for a dictator—a Big Brother—to take control of education for narrow, partisan purposes.

Seen as a bastion of national defense, one sees education in a new and different perspective. Currently the power of education is about as poorly focused on the crucial problems of our national survival as would the power of the military if it were to depend upon local police forces.

Prediction #4: *Monitoring the outcomes of education will become a major national concern.*

To some extent, this is already a matter of concern. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* fired off a broadside at our public schools charging that they were doing a poor job of preparing our youths for the challenges facing them.

Now, five years later, a follow-up report issued by the federal education office asserts, "The baby's still on the critical list. The vital signs are getting better, stronger. But not much has happened since 1983." Such reports depend upon how the researchers gathered evidence of the condition of the schools. Two huge roadblocks stand in the way. One is the state of the art of measuring outcomes. Standardized tests, indeed, have their limitations. Many of the best outcomes of good schools elude measurement in stubborn ways—the love for learning, for example, instilled by creative, inspirational teachers.

The other is the repugnance felt by teachers, principals, and superintendents to the public monitoring of their efforts. Mitch Brickell and I first proposed a systematic monitoring component of the *Davies-Brickell System for School Board Policy Making* in 1956. For years thereafter we tried to "sell" the idea to school administrators with zero results. School boards liked the idea. But without superintendent support, it got nowhere.

The first real progress came with the passing of laws and the issuance of state education department regulations in the 1970s—in states like Florida, California, and Connecticut—requiring a modicum of reporting of evidence of student achievement to state officials and legislators.

However, some of the initial progress was later neutralized as school people developed the strength to rebel (leading to a watering-down of the original actions).

Prediction #5: *Boards of education, like dinosaurs, will disappear.*

The multiplication of directives and regulations from state and federal levels severely restricts the freedom of decisioning of local boards, which are increasingly serving *ministerial* rather than *discretionary* functions. The growth of the *regulation* portion of local "policy" manuals in comparison with the *policy* portion supports my position. For example, the new "Core Manual" promoted by the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education does not offer a section on Goals and Objectives.

School boards are, in my opinion, doomed—to be replaced, like the Phoenix rising from the ashes, by an immensely more important body which will be part of a newly devised education communication and control system.

Prediction #6: *The keystone of the new system will be a highly independent "National Educational Goals and Policies Commission."*

The National Educational Goals and Policies Commission, a quasi-independent body—comparable in independence to the Federal Reserve Board and the Supreme Court—would be established by the Congress and assigned several important functions such as:

- Developing a statement of national educational goals compatible with the long-term best interests of our country, subject to review by the Congress.
- Directing a network of comparable bodies having similar functions at the state and local school district levels. Said state and local commissions would have the authority to supplement the national goals and policies with others suited to the special needs of their constituencies.
- Monitoring, assisted by its state and local counterparts, the outcomes and then accrediting schools in relation to stated goals and policies and reporting its findings, at each level, to the Educational Administrative Service.
- Providing hearing times and procedures for people to express their views on school goals and policies. The Commission would be expected to act upon any such suggestions or appeals to the fullest extent within existing goals and policies, and where basic changes would appear desirable, to report them with recommendations to the Congress.
- Only persons whose levels of education, business, or professional experience; records of community service; and absence of conflict of interest, wide country and world perspective, and demonstrated devotion to the cause of education will be appointed to the Educational Goals and Policies Commission. Procedures for their appointment will be, to the fullest extent, nonpolitical and be for long terms, perhaps for life.

Prediction #7: *An Educational Administrative Service (EAS) will be created by the Congress.*

The new EAS will supplement and to some extent replace the current national, state, and local system for operating the schools. The EAS will be required to take any corrective action needed to enable the schools to achieve the stated goals.

As for school finance, the EAS will be charged with setting up funding for supporting schools in all states at a defensible level, with opportunities for those districts and states to exceed this level on their own if they want to do so.

As for school education programs, each state and each local district will be permitted to set its own curriculum, select its own materials and methods of instruction—restricted only by evidence that the outcomes of such instruction will satisfy the goal and policy expectations set by the respective Goals and Policies Commissions. Each school will

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be placed in competition with other like schools in such a way that evidences of superachievement will lead to monetary and other rewards and honors for staff and students. Schools that consistently underachieve according to the established goals will be subject to corrective measures up to and including total replacement.

There will be no need for school boards as now constituted. Their current functions will be assumed by trained professionals who will be held strictly accountable for results. The Department of Education will direct the EAS at the national level.

Note that, in a sense, the Commissions are like ideal school boards which have been relieved of all administrative functions and enabled to focus directly upon goals, policies, and outcomes—with responsibility and power to shake up the EAS when results fall short of goals.

Each school and/or school district will have recognized procedures, including recourse to the law, for hearing suggestions and grievances from the community. Individual rights and group rights will be protected. Corrections in in-school procedures will be made administratively.

Prediction #8: *The parallel structures supporting goal setting and achievement and administrative support will be encompassed in a plan for wide opportunity for lifelong public education.*

The public will recognize that the preservation of our way of life will depend upon the full utilization of our collective talents from childhood to old age.

They will recognize, too, the virtue of simplicity in the parallel functions of goal setting/achievement, monitoring, and provision of administrative service.

Summation

A new pattern of school control is predicted which will stress **elitest guidance to popular control**. [I am searching for a better word than "elitist." I want a word that transmits a picture of competence, honesty, breadth of vision, compassion, broad education, rich experience in community activities and so on . . . .] Does local control disappear, as direly predicted earlier in this discussion? Or . . . does it, like the Phoenix, fly up in renewed and more splendid form? As here predicted? What do you think?■

What national goals?

by Victor J. Ross

The thesis of Davies' article is okay in one respect. But he commits too many errors of omission, is guilty of convoluted logic, and puffs hyperbole to excess. He even accuses NSBA and state school boards associations of "hurrying the destruction of local control by distributing sample [board] policies . . . . "

Mercy! He might as well attack Motherhood, Apple Pie, and the Beach Boys!

The point he makes about the erosion of local control is appropriate. But Davies is being just plain silly when he hopscotches over vital happenings and leaps to the conclusion that American education "will have to be in harmony with national goals," and "subject to review by the Congress."

What national goals? If they exist, tell us **where?**

Congress should control the goals of education? Heaven help us. He's talking about the Congress that "invests" our Social Security payments as part of the national deficit; the Congress that has helped pile up a $368 billion trade deficit, making us the world's largest debtor; the Congress that passed the asbestos regulations (AHERA) with an impossible deadline . . . . I could go on, but you get the point.

Entrust the education of our youth—our most vital asset—to Congress? I think not.

Local control of school boards has been eroded, no doubt about it. However, the situation is not hopeless and members of local boards are not the weak-kneed simpletons Davies portrays. U.S. Supreme Court decisions have taken away most boards' budget development power and handed it to state legislatures, but that has not rendered school boards powerless.

We simply can't overlook, as did Davies, the fact that locally-elected school boards have and still do set admirable goals for their districts. To state that these goals are "subject to local whims and prejudices" is more than unfair—it is humbug. It's my experience that most boards respond appropriately to suggestions and emotional cries for reform set forth in the many publications calling for better public schools.

Do educators feel "repugnance" to public monitoring of their efforts? I think not. Is "the power of education poorly focused" in regard to serious national problems? Again, no. The U.S. Surgeon General is not setting forth the solutions to the AIDS problem; that job has been given to education. Ditto for sex education, critical thinking skills, and alcohol and drug abuse prevention.

I agree with Diane Ravitch in her book, *The Troubled Crusade*. Americans expect schools to "preserve democracy, eliminate poverty, lower the crime rate, enrich the common culture, reduce unemployment, ease the assimilation of immigrants to the nation, prevent traffic accidents, raise health standards, refine moral character, and guide young people into useful occupations."

And we have not turned our backs on these problems, nor are we the intellectual and social inferiors Davies makes us out to be. I've often thought there should be a better way to run school districts than by putting them in the hands of locally elected or appointed school boards. However, I've never been able to come up with an alternative system of governance that would be better. Neither has Daniel R. Davies.

Regrets, Dr. Davies. The sun has not set on local control of education, nor are boards of education likely to be lowered into their eternal resting places to make way for Big Brother.

Dr. Ross is superintendent of the Aurora (CO) Public Schools, author, and frequent contributor to NSBA publications.

Policy is evolving . . . .

by Linda Leopardi

Local school board policies and local control of education go together like the arts and technology. They are mutually supportive—and both will continue to serve essential functions in the hybrid system of federal and local education described by Davies.

Local policy development did not peak during the sixties: It began. Prior to that time, school board action generally dealt with specific situations and ignored the broader issues. As local educational systems grew more complex, local control proponents like Davies recognized the need for an efficient and effective governance/management system and took up the challenge.

Local control of education has not declined; it has evolved. Board policy

is recognized now as local law. For example, a wide variety of court decisions have defined the law-making role of the local school board by recognizing the board's right and responsibility to set policy.

Policymaking is more complex than before because it must govern the local system while staying within the parameters imposed by "intrusive" state and federal laws. In most instances, those laws provide room for local interpretation. In many, the language of the law requires such local discretion.

While the "multiplication of directives and regulations from state and federal levels . . . " appears to restrict the freedom of local board decisionmaking, the requirements are necessary to implement national and state frameworks for education. These plans have evolved from the best thinking of the most knowledgeable and dedicated parents, professional educators, and business and civic leaders: all of whom represent in one way or another the experiences of school districts. Local boards of education should supplement these frameworks as is appropriate and necessary in order to meet specific local needs. That is local control in the eighties.

I think that Dan Davies believes there are common goals and assessment criteria—educational frameworks—that can be identified with reasonable accuracy. These standards are influenced greatly by state and national school boards associations—organizations composed of people from the one place where educators make a difference: the local school district.

If local control is not to go the way of the dinosaur, the fine-tuning and monitoring of these frameworks must remain the responsibility of local governing boards. The much-made argument that these frameworks are really a form of state and federal regulation that will erode local control need not become a self-fulfilling prophecy as long as school boards continue to listen to the communities and incorporate their needs into district curricula and programs.

Linda Leopardi is director of policy services for the California School Boards Association and national chairman of the American Association of State Policy Services.

Progress depends on local control

by Ann P. Kahn

Davies' article should be retitled *Onward and Backward*. In trying to move from educational rhetoric to reality, most reform proposals stress greater local accountability, flexibility, and creativity. Instead, Davies offers a rigid national mold for school organization and curricula in addition to several layers of bureaucrats to "oversee . . . direct . . . monitor . . . and report."

Many involved in education will challenge his plan because they have learned that the further away governance is from the problem, the greater the likelihood of a flawed solution.

The "straw men" Davies portrays should be exposed:

- *A national agreement on the goal of educational effectiveness.* "Effective schools" researchers conclude that goals are attainable only when they reflect an agreement among those who use the system, those who finance the system, and those who depend on its products. None of the participants can be effective if they are perched in a federal ivory tower.
- *The quality of school board leadership has declined because of local advocacy groups.* Boards of education are the connecting link to those who have the greatest stake in the success of education. The process of give and take should not be viewed as a competing contest of wills and selfish purposes. Removing policymaking from the reach of these advocacy groups will enhance the appeal of private schools as a place where parents feel their voices can be heard.
- *The appeal of "national monitoring of educational achievement."* Skeptics will target the amount of time and funds diverted from instruction by the endless comparisons of information, much of which is already known. The ongoing quest to "legislate achievement" already has led to countless state and federal laws and regulations of incredible rigidity.

Many proposed reforms have floundered on the shoals of inadequate funding. The EAS and U.S. Department of Education will determine the "defensible level of school expenditures" and presumably Congress will fund the request. Good luck! The only current prototype is the Overseas Schools system. Its track record of difficulties stems from the power of federal agencies and Congress to act as the sole governing authority and funding source. Parents stationed overseas have no way to "fight city hall" when other priorities erode support for the education of their children.

Congress is seen as the planned buffer against arbitrary decisions by the new federal-level decisionmakers. Before you expect Congress to understand local budget problems, take a good look at how education currently competes for funds against other national priorities: about 6 percent of the federal domestic budget is earmarked for education (which is down from 9 percent in 1981).

When all else fails and Davies' reforms still do not produce the desired results, the EAS has the power to "take corrective measures, up to and including total replacement" of school systems. But the plan doesn't say "with what" or "with whom."

"The virtue of simplicity and parallel functions" described by Davies in no way mends the damaged channels of public understanding and support for education. His new "ideal school boards, relieved of administrative functions and working on achievement of goals" fail in their basic mission of local accountability.

I believe that many "ideal" school boards already exist and deliver a quality education to local communities—a situation that is not possible under Davies' plan. American education would benefit more from efforts to strengthen the skills and vision of school board members. We should not give up on the strengths of local governance, especially when the alternative is a rigid system of national control, prescribed curriculum, and comprehensive monitoring of outcomes.

Thanks, Dr. Davies, but no thanks.

Ann Kahn is a consultant to the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. During her 11 years on the Fairfax County (VA) School Board, she served as its chairman from 1981-84. She is a past president of the National PTA (1985-87).